

## Analysis of Poetic Literature Using B. F. Skinner's Theoretical Framework from *Verbal Behavior*

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This paper examines Skinner's work on verbal behavior in the context of literature as a particular class of written verbal behavior. It looks at contemporary literary theory and analysis and the contributions that Skinner's theoretical framework can make. Two diverse examples of poetic literature are chosen and analyzed following Skinner's framework, examining the dynamic interplay between the writer and reader that take place within the bounds of the work presented. It is concluded that Skinner's hypotheses about verbal behavior and the functional approach to understanding it have much to offer literary theorists in their efforts to understand literary works and should be more carefully examined.

Literary analysis has traditionally ignored the contributions that Skinner has made to the understanding of written verbal behavior. When students are taught to analyze literature, they are taught to examine why the work is significant, what the work means, and how the author is saying it. They are taught to deal with the material they analyze in terms of imagery, ideas, word choice, ordering, sentence structure, and significance (Birky, 1999).

Literary theory is renowned for its complexity and difficulty (Ryan, 1999). It is marked by influences as diverse as Aristotle, Freud, and Marx. Criticism is founded on theory, or a mixture of theories (Rice & Waugh, 2001) and a number of different theories have enjoyed significant influence in literary criticism. Formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, post-structuralism, feminism, historicism, and post-colonialism are some of the more prevalent schools of literary criticism. Each of these theories contributes to perspectives on the critical analysis of literature.

The earliest literary theory, Aristotelian, emphasized the objective features of text and reasoned that all elements of a text could be carefully arranged to form a unified whole which could be examined by the literary theorist without regard to the motivations or environmental situation of the writer (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./2000). Human beings were considered the center—a fixed, stable entity that could

apprehend reality through empirical study.

In literary criticism, the notion of an objective text and an empirical analyst who could be detached from that text has undergone change. The lines between text and history, literature and philosophy, truth and rhetoric have become increasingly blurred (Rice & Waugh, 2001). Human beings are no longer the center and reality is no longer, necessarily, fixed. Uncertainty has crept in at all levels, even at the metalanguage level of critical thought. Saussure's theories about the signification of language in 1915, Kuhn's conception of paradigms and paradigm shifts in 1970, and Foucault's ideas of historical context (Foucault, 1954-1984/1998) all contributed to a theoretical framework in which Skinner's analysis of literature could take place.

Booth contributes a close analysis of fiction in his volume, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983). His examination of the interplay between reader and writer in fiction comes nearest to Skinner's conception of literary works as a form of verbal behavior. Skinner's analysis of literature distinguishes itself with its examination of the dynamic nature of a text as it mediates between the reader and writer. Skinner contributes a unique perspective to the analysis of literature while still operating under well-established theoretical frameworks. Skinner differs from Booth's effort to construct an organization for analysis of literature based on form (Booth, 1983) in that Skinner's organization is based on function.

Skinner also differs from Booth in his explicit questioning of the control of a writer over the text (Skinner, 1972). Skinner questioned

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sharply the origination of any literary piece with the writer him/herself, asking if it was not, perhaps, a product of the writer's particular, individual history (Skinner, 1972). While the question of who/what controlled a text was shifting outside of the sphere of the individual writer, this was still a radical departure from current literary theory, although there are some similarities to that conception in Freud's theories of the unconscious.

This paper examines the status of literature in Skinner's work on verbal behavior and applies his suggestions about analysis of literature to two poetic works in order to examine the operability of Skinner's analytic framework. I have found only one other work, to date, that attempts such an application (Lull, 1983). However, this work differed from the present paper in its focus.

Lull applied Skinner's operant analysis of verbal behavior to poetic works by Shakespeare, Herbert, Donne, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich. She focused on social contingencies and effects of particular environments on the written verbal behavior of these writers. Lull sought evidence of cause for these literary works in the environmental influence and personal history of these writers. She also investigated the influence of multiple causation over these particular works (Lull, 1983).

We can analyze literature as operant behavior, allowing us to understand and predict future occurrences of literary behavior. "The literary community," Skinner wrote, "provides sensitive examples of verbal behavior" (Skinner, 1957, p. 96), encouraging expression that might be punished in other communities. Because of this permissive environment, literature contains examples of verbal behavior that might not have otherwise survived.

### *Poetic Literature*

Shakespeare's sonnet beginning with the line, "When my love swears that she is made of truth," speaks of the lies he feels that his lover tells him (Figure 1). In return, he tells the reader, he tells his lover lies of his own. He explains why he allows her to persist in her lies and how flattering these lies become for a couple that have long been in love. An analysis like this is closest to the level of the naïve reader, reading the poem for the first time.

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**Figure 1**

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When my love swears that she is made of  
truth  
I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
That she might think me some untutor'd  
youth,  
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.  
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me  
young,  
Although she knows my days are past the  
best,  
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:  
On both sides thus is simple truth  
suppress'd.  
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
And wherefore say not I that I am old?  
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
And age in love loves not to have years  
told:  
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,  
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

Shakespeare, Sonnet CXXXVIII

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Further analysis, however, reveals the components of this piece that elicit emotional responses, allowing the reader to identify with the writer and strengthening the reader's behavior, affecting the probability that the reader will return to read the poem again or search for more work by the same author—two typical responses of a reader who is responding to the reinforcing contingencies at work through the piece. The writer's ability to elicit this kind of response from a reader can have elements of automatic reinforcement (just as with speaking), it contains reinforcing contingencies controlled by the reader or audience and may even (speaking to multiple control) allow the writer an appropriate venue for expressing emotional behavior that would be punished elsewhere.

A sonnet has a particular form, which respects certain grammatical rules. Shakespeare may have chosen to write a sonnet because of the expectations of the verbal community of which he was a part, or he may have chosen the form because he was adept at using it, but it is difficult to gauge Shakespeare's motivation for this stylistic choice. A specific verbal community recognizes the sonnet as a form of poetry and those in the community who are familiar with the form may read the poem as a representative of the form, identifying certain

elements and responding positively to them. Many of Shakespeare's final selections in word order and autoclitic variations appear to be influenced by his decision to adhere to the stress patterns and form requirements of the sonnet. A reader reinforces the writer by responding to the poem's adherence to the rules it acknowledges. A reader is reinforced by her knowledge of iambic pentameter and reads the poem aloud, as her response is shaped by her history of responses to poems in the sonnet form.

At this point, a reader can shift her analysis of the poem to smaller units. The first eight lines of the poem represent a tact in which the writer tells the reader of the poem something about himself and his relationship with his lover. The ninth and tenth lines are *mands* for information but seem to function for the writer more as rhetorical devices than true *mands*. He asks questions which the reader cannot answer.

And the final four lines function as a second tact, identifying the nature of the writer's relationship with his lover, allowing the reader greater access to the writer's perspective. Within this larger framework, Shakespeare utilizes a number of supplementary variables to contribute to the strength of the piece as a whole. There are several ways to examine the thematic elements of this poem. Words like "truth," "untutor'd," "credit," "trust," "believe," "unlearned," "simple," "love," "youth," and "swears" are juxtaposed with "lies," "false," "subtleties," "vainly," "past the best," "false speaking," "suppress'd," "unjust," "old," "seeming," "loves not," "faults," and "flatter'd." With his use of these words within a single poem he creates a work that characterizes the multiple variables that affect his choices.

Shakespeare appears to be torn between two states, that of youth/truth and old/lies or unable to resolve how to pair the words—what IS truth, what ARE lies, they are not simple—and resolves the problem in the end, perfectly represented in the multiple sources of strength for a single word—"lie" (as used in the thirteenth line). This sonnet represents an emphasis of the seeming opposition between truth and lies, concluding in the end that the distinction between the two may be subject to question.

The first two lines of Shakespeare's sonnet function as a single verbal operant. The effects of formal strengthening seem to have influenced the writer in arranging the three distinct

parts. The first part, "When my love swears that she is made of truth," is an autoclitic functioning to modify the speaker's tact—"I do believe her...." "Though I know she lies," seems to function as yet another autoclitic modifying the same tact. The third line of the poem functions as an explanation of the speaker's action in the first two lines. The speaker tacts his motivation for his decision to believe his lover, stating that he would like his lover to think of him as an "untutor'd youth." He expands further on this explanation with an autoclitic in the fourth line, identifying himself as "unlearned."

In the fifth line, the speaker reveals another level of complexity by tacting his thoughts about what his lover is thinking. The sixth line contains an autoclitic which functions to strengthen the idea that even though his lover may know better, she appears willing to participate in a deception that flatters the speaker. His recognition of this complicity continues in line seven, when he uses the tact, "I credit her." The speaker recognizes and appreciates his lover's willingness to participate in flattering deception and the speaker determines to return the favor. And in line eight, the speaker uses an autoclitic with multiple sources of control, referring to "simple truth suppress'd." The contrasting thematic elements, which are woven throughout the entire sonnet, are also presented in the space of a single line.

Lines nine and ten, while *mands* for information, illustrate the process of composition in the speaker's choice to place mirror images together. The complexity of word order in both questions function to draw the reader into the speaker's state of confusion over the distinction between the states of truth and untruth.

Line eleven tacts a characteristic of love, using autoclitics such as "seeming" to maintain an element of uncertainty and creating an environment in which the reader can share in the speaker's emotional state. Line twelve tacts characteristics of love as it changes over time, again eliciting an emotional response from the reader, which is maintained by the prose meaning of the line. The word *love* functions as a noun and a verb in immediate physical proximity—"love loves." This flexibility of words in the hands of a writer or speaker becomes an important element to consider when analyzing verbal behavior. The form of verbal behavior may be important but there seems to be com-

elling reasons for analysis of function when form may be so fluid.

Similarly, the word “lie” in line thirteen, because of the speaker’s presentation—“I lie with her and she with me,” functions on two levels, in a single instance, as a noun and a verb simultaneously. The sonnet concludes with line fourteen, as the speaker concludes that the lies he and his lover tell one another contribute to their relationship by concealing the faults of both. The reversal of the phrases “and in our faults” and “by lies we flatter’d be,” seems to be controlled primarily by the formal demands of the sonnet form.

The same system of analysis can be applied to other works. I chose as my second example the rap lyrics of Tupac Shakur in a song entitled “White Man’s World” (Figure 2). It is this breadth that Skinner’s analytic framework should be able to comfortably encompass in order for it to remain a useful tool in the analysis of verbal behavior. Lyrics are different from poetry in that they are accompanied by music, music that affects the experience for both writer and reader. However, the difference in form between poetry and lyrics does not lessen their similarities in function.

In analyzing these song lyrics several themes are evident. The first is that of white supremacy; an assertion that the world “belongs” to the white man and that to prevent annihilation by the white race, the black man must fight back. Evidence of this theme is in the title of the song “White Man’s World,” in the autoclitics: “cruel world,” “reparations are due,” “the have-nots,” “bein born with less,” “we act like we don’t love ourselves,” “strugglin’,” “locked up falsely,” “we under attack,” “masses of people ... suffering,” “victim,” “endangered species,” “extinct,” “killin’ us,” “burden bearers,” and in the mands: “help me raise my black nation,” “look at you!” “leave me, for somebody that’s richer,” “gotta make it,” “check yourselves,” “we must fight,” “bear with me,” “remember that they can’t stop us,” “they can never take us out,” “use your brain,” “you better watch it.” Related themes include apologies to women of color, economic inequality, and loss of loved ones. On a certain level, the writer appeals to a restricted audience or community, those with whom he identifies himself and identifies by skin color. On another level, however, the song is accessible to a larger community because of its ability to elicit an emotional response, al-

Figure 2

“You go bustin your fist against a stone wall,  
you’re not usin your brain. That’s what the  
white man wants you to do.  
Look at you! What makes you ashamed of  
bein black?”

(Nuttin but love for you my sister)  
Might even know how hard it is (no doubt)  
Bein a woman, a black woman at that? (no  
doubt)  
Shit - in this white man’s world  
Sometimes we overlook the fact that we be  
ridin hard on our sisters  
we don’t be knowin the pain we be causin  
(in this white man’s world)  
In this white man’s world, I ain’t sayin I’m  
innocent in all this  
I’m just sayin (in this white man’s world)  
This song is for y’all  
For all those times that I messed up or we  
messed up

[Tupac]  
Dear sister, got me twisted up in prison I  
miss ya  
Cryin lookin at my niece’s and my  
newpew’s picture  
They say don’t let this cruel world get ya,  
kinda suspicious  
Swearin one day you might leave me, for  
somebody that’s richer  
Twist the cap off the bottle, I take a sip and  
see tomorrow  
Gotta make if I have to beg or borrow  
Readin love letters; late night, locked down  
and quiet  
If brothers don’t receive they mail best be-  
lieve we riot  
Eatin Jack-(mat), starin at walls of silence  
inside this cage where they captured all my  
rage and violence  
In time I learned a few lessons, never fall  
for riches  
Aplogizies to my TRUE sisters; far from  
bitches  
Help me raise my black nation reparations  
are due, it’s true  
Caught up in this world I took advantage of  
you  
So tell the babies how I love them, precious  
boys and girls  
Born black in this white man’s world—and  
all I heard was

[Chorus — sung]  
Who, knows what tomorrow brings

(Continued, p. 111)

In this world, where everyone's blind  
And where to go, no matter how far I'll find  
To let you know, that you're not alone

[Tupac over Chorus]

Only thing they ever did wrong (YES, YES)  
was bein born black, in this white man's  
world (NO DOUBT)

(All my ghetto motherfuckers be proud to  
be black and be PROUD)  
All my little black seeds, born black in this  
white man's world  
(to have this shit like this, cause ain't NO-  
BODY got it like this)  
(All these motherfuckers wanna be like us,  
they all wanna be like us)  
(To be the have-nots, all hail)  
(God bless the child that can hold his own,  
no motherfuckin doubt)

[Tupac]

Bein born with less I must confess only adds  
on to the stress  
Two gunshots to my homie's head, dyed in  
his vest  
Shot him to death and left him bleedin for  
his family to see  
I pass his casket gently askin, is there heaven  
for G's?  
My homeboy's doin life, his baby momma  
be stressin  
Sheddin tears when her son, finally ask that  
questions  
Where my daddy at? Mama why we live so  
poor?  
Why you cryin? Heard you late night through  
my bedroom door  
Now do you love me mama? Whitey keep  
on callin me nigga?  
Get my weight up with my hate and pay 'em  
back when I'm bigger  
And still thuggin in this jail cell, missin my  
block  
Hearin brothers screamin all night, wishin  
they'd stop  
Proud to be black but why we act like we  
don't love ourselves  
Don't look around busta (you sucka) check  
yourselves  
Know what it MEANS to be black, whether  
a man or girl  
We still strugglin, in this white man's world

[Chorus]

[\*megaphone\* over Chorus]

"We must fight, for brother Mumia  
We must fight, for brother Mutulu

And we must fight, for brother (?)  
We must fight, for brother Geronimo Pratt  
We must fight ... for (?), Zulu, (?)  
We must fight, for the government's politi-  
cal prisoners  
They are locked up falsely by this white  
man."

[Tupac]

So tell me why you—  
changed to choose a new direction, in the  
blink of an eye  
My time away just made perfection; did you  
think I'd die?  
Not gon' cry, why should I care  
Like we holdin on to lost love that's no longer  
there  
Can you please help me, God bless me please  
keep my seeds healthy  
Makin all my enemies bleed while my G's  
wealthy  
Hopin they bury me with ammunitions,  
weed, and shells  
Just in case they trip in heaven—ain't no G's  
(in) hell  
Sister sorry for the pain that I caused your  
heart  
I know I'll change if you help me, but don't  
fall apart  
Rest in peace to Latasha, Lil' Yummy, and  
Kato  
Too much for this cold world to take—ended  
up bein fatal  
Every wom(a)n in America, especially black  
Bear with me, can't you see, that we under  
attack  
I never meant to cause drama, to my sister  
and mama  
Hope we make it, to better times, in this white  
man's world

[Chorus]—3X

[Dialogue over Chorus] (Malcolm X)

"You're out of touch with reality!  
There are a few of you in a few smoke filled  
rooms (calling) that the  
mainstream  
wound up (sic) (While the) masses of the  
people  
White and black, red, yellow, and, (and)  
brown  
(All) invulnerable are suffering, in this na-  
tion."

[Tupac over Chorus]

Remember that, in this white man's world,  
they can't stop us

(Continued, p. 112)

We've been here all this time they ain't took  
us out  
They can never take us out  
No matter what they say, about us bein ex-  
tinct  
about us being endangered species, we ain't  
NEVER gon' leave this  
We ain't NEVER gon' walk off this planet,  
unless Y'ALL choose to  
Use your brain, use your brain  
It ain't THEM that's killin us it's US that's  
killin us  
It ain't THEM that's knockin us off, it's US  
that's knockin us off  
I'm tellin you better watch it, or be a victim  
Be a victim, in this white man's world ...  
... born black, in this white man's world, no  
doubt  
And it's dedicated to my motherfuckin teach-  
ers

Mutulu Shakur, Geronimo Pratt, Mumia Abu  
Jamal  
Sekou Odinga, all the real O.G.'s, we out

[Malcolm X]  
The seal, and the constitution, reflect the  
thinking  
of the founding fathers, that this was, to be a  
nation  
by white people, and for white people. Na-  
tive Americans,  
blacks, and all other non-white people, were  
to be the  
burden bearers, for the real citizens of this  
nation.

Lyrics of Tupac Shakur's song,  
"White Man's World"

lowing the reader to identify with the writer's situation.

Violence and pain are juxtaposed throughout the length of the work. It is the tension created between these two emotional states that manipulate the reader into an engagement with the content. Initially, we are confronted by strong demands about "bustin' your fist against a stone wall," and "ridin' hard." The writer is in prison, he drinks, and is "locked down" "where they captured all my rage and violence." Expletives add to the sense of violence, as the reader is assaulted by the harshness of the words. The writer describes a world filled with "riot(s)," "gunshots" and "bleeding," "hate" and "pay back," "screamin'," "strugglin'," "enemies," and "fight." It is a world where a man's most necessary possessions are "ammunitions," "weed," and "shells;" in this world and the next, because of the stress of being "under attack."

Coupled with this violence, however, is the pain of exposure to it. The writer has nothing but "love" for his black "sister." He speaks of "pain," "innocent(ce)," "hope," and is "crying" and "twisted up"—"sorry." While in prison, the writer reads "love letters" and stares at "walls of silence." He wants to let the reader know that he is "not alone." The writer "confess(es)," "gently askin'," is there heaven...?" He is "holdin' on to lost love that's no longer there." The writer details the funeral of a close friend and references losses of other friends and rela-

tives to violent ends. The interjections of recorded material borrowed from other sources (i.e. speech of Malcolm X) make additional reference to injustices (i.e. Geronimo Pratt, treatment of Native Americans, etc.).

I will examine more closely the sixth stanza of Tupac's song. The stanza as a whole unit, addresses the writer's confusion and anger at the situation in which he finds himself. His use of autoclitics ("I must confess," "I pass his casket gently askin'") relays to the reader the emotional state of the writer. An additional source of strength is found in the assonance of the line "I pass his casket gently askin'" that contributes to the engagement of the reader. Those within Tupac's closest community recognize the situation and are emotionally involved from the first line which states: "Bein born with less ... only adds on to the stress...." The word "died" used in line two is affected by multiple sources of control—the man has "died" and his vest is "dyed" with his blood. The juxtaposition of the word "gently" amongst so many words which elicit violent, angry emotion ("stress," "gunshots," "shot," "death," "bleedin'") contributes to the tension between violent and sad emotional states. The questions that the child asks of his mother, manding for information that she cannot provide, eliciting, instead, tears, provides the writer with a way to tact his own emotional state. The writer's ability to tact his own emotional state provides



a way for the reader to connect to that emotional experience. The writer's deliberate choices contribute to his success in making his audience behave verbally, or nonverbally, to the state of affairs.

The community that shares the writer's verbal repertoire and reinforces this kind of literary work shapes much of the grammatical structure of this work. A deliberate rhyming pattern is evident throughout the course of the lyrics. A rap artist's rhyming pattern is individualized and becomes a personal signature over the course of an artist's development. It often contains a range of cultural influences. Rap, or hip-hop music has grown from an oral tradition, which includes long narrative poems (toasts) and rhetorical marks and devices of blues culture (vulgar language, double entendres, boasting, and machismo) (Dyson, 2000). The writer's understanding of the musical medium, which will carry these lyrics, controls his choices as well. Those who will listen to the lyrics rather than read them may be the dominant audience, but to be successful, the lyrics must function across both media.

The community also dictates some choice of words, a verbal repertoire that is specific to the community ("homeboy," "homie," "G's," "nigga," "thuggin," "brothers," "busta," "sucka"). Others in the audience are not left out, however, as the language used allows for understanding on multiple levels. In the end, the message that the writer seems adamant to share with the reader comes in the form of a mand. He addresses his audience directly, "don't look around busta (you sucka) check yourselves." The writer admonishes his reader to examine him/herself and "know what it means to be black...."

Both Shakespeare and Tupac Shakur emit verbal behavior that affects the behavior of the reader. This effect can occur in several ways. For one, a reader might emit an emotional response to the textual stimulus. For another, a reader's corresponding behavior may be clarified or strengthened as an effect of contact with the textual stimulus. Someone holding a particular belief may be strengthened in his/her belief by reading of similar belief in another. Such strengthening may even lead to verbal or nonverbal behavior on the part of the reader (i.e. a letter to the editor, participation in a protest). In this same fashion, throughout the process of composition, the behavior of the writer

him/herself is also affected. When writers compose, they work through several drafts and each time they revise their work they emit operant behavior. A writer may read his work, assess the effect, and change a word or a line based on that assessment. The final product we, as readers, contact then affects our behaving as well.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of literature in Skinner's work on verbal behavior and applied his theoretical framework to two, very diverse, works of literature. Skinner's hypotheses about a functional approach to understanding the way we use verbal behavior seem to have been neglected by the traditional literary theorists. Skinner analyzed the process of composition and how the speaker might compose in order to elicit responses from his/reader. He hypothesized that textual behavior could be analyzed as simply another form of verbal behavior, subject to the same rules of functional organization as other forms of behavior. Skinner's belief that literature operates under the same rules as other types of respondent and operant behavior demystifies the writing process. It allows us to predict the occurrence of future literary behavior and to understand the emotional responses we have as readers.

There are useful things to be taken from Skinner's work that could be carefully examined for their contributions to our understanding of literature as a particular form of verbal behavior. The significance of function in the analysis of literature deserves examination. It may be that function contributes to the determination of form and, if that is the case, understanding function in verbal behavior may contribute to our expanded understanding and prediction of complex human behavior. While verbal behavior is complex, it is, in fact, a tool that is used for a purpose. Literary verbal behavior seems to function primarily as a tool used for eliciting specific emotional responses from the reader or as a tool through which the writer can behave appropriately even through difficult emotional barriers (i.e. emotional demands that might influence our behavior). Within this functional framework there is room for a wide variety of forms. Our analysis and understanding of function could lend signifi-

cant support to our analysis and understanding of form across many kinds of literary behavior. Literary analysis would benefit from the addition of theoretical frameworks such as Skinner proposes.

... what's poetry, if it is worth its salt,  
but a phrase men can pass from hand to mouth?

From hand to mouth, across the centuries,  
the bread that lasts when systems have decayed,  
when, in his forest of barbed-wire branches,  
a prisoner circles, chewing the one phrase  
whose music will last longer than the leaves ...  
(Walcott, n.d.)

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